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Without Justice for All

**The New Liberalism
and Our Retreat from
Racial Equality**

**Edited by
Adolph Reed Jr.**

Without Justice for All



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*The New Liberalism and
Our Retreat from Racial Equality*

edited by
Adolph Reed Jr.

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*To my comrades in the Chicago labor movement
and activist community, in gratitude
for all you've done for me and
all we've done together*



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Introduction: The New Liberal Orthodoxy on Race and Inequality

Adolph Reed Jr.

THIS BOOK COMES TOGETHER as a direct challenge to a rightward-tacking narrative that has gained currency in American liberal politics in general and the Democratic Party in particular. Partly spurred by Reaganism's success in the 1980s, this narrative has become an orthodoxy—if not a hegemonic ideology—in the 1990s. In this New Liberal orthodoxy, liberals and leftists have lost favor with the American electorate because they have moved away from the American people and have become too closely identified with “special interests.” These special interests typically are held to include the labor movement, feminists, gays, secularists, civil libertarians, poor people, and nonwhite minorities, especially blacks. The punch line in this narrative is that restoring liberal, or Democratic, credibility requires establishing distance from these supposedly “marginal” constituencies and appealing to a “mainstream” American voter. In this context, mainstream means relatively well-off, white, and male, in some combination or another. Militant devotion to this mainstream is a symbolic meeting ground for several tendencies that rest uneasily within a Democratic Party that has become the institutional home of left-liberal politics since the decline of the activist movements of the 1960s.

From one direction, a neoliberal element would recast liberal politics along lines that break with the Keynesian pragmatism and pluralist public budgeting that has defined the liberal-progressive axis in American politics since the New Deal. This neoliberalism either

trumpets the triumph of the market as the ultimate basis of social rationality or insists that challenging the market's hegemony is futilely impolitic, which amounts to the same thing. This strain therefore advocates reducing and privatizing public functions—or, in the Orwellian euphemism coined by David Osborne and operationalized by Vice President Al Gore, “reinventing government”—in service to a narrowly market-oriented notion of efficiency and an ideal of fiscal responsibility. Although this neoliberalism often includes support, or at least acceptance, of conventionally liberal stances on such “social issues” as abortion rights, gay rights, environmental protection, or even drug legalization, it retreats from downwardly redistributive social welfare policy, a disposition characteristically justified with a rhetoric stressing fiscal constraint, realpolitik, and the need to direct public policy toward encouraging personal responsibility or “choice.”

From a second direction, a communitarian tendency similarly draws on the rhetoric of responsibility, though in service to a more actively coercive social vision. This vision is propelled by a commitment that public policy should enforce, or at least reinforce, putatively majoritarian values. Though it is less self-consciously technocratic than neoliberal critiques, the communitarian tendency is hardly averse to social engineering. Indeed, communitarians may exhibit a firmer faith than even the conventional left-liberals they denigrate that government action can produce specifically virtuous outcomes. Thus, communitarians see public policy as a vehicle for inculcating desired individual values and behavior and therefore often argue for such interventions as limiting income support for impoverished single parents and denying it to single teenaged parents, restricting access to abortion, and toughening divorce laws as mechanisms for strengthening families. The communitarian critique maintains that left-liberal politics has erred in not honoring majoritarian notions of virtue and desert and has alienated its natural base by coddling and rewarding those who fail to honor dominant norms. From this perspective, the draconian turn in criminal justice policy—for example, capital punishment, three-strikes provisions, mandatory sentencing, suspension of the Bill of Rights for residents of low-income public housing—and punitive social policy appeal both as deterrents and as signals of good faith to the heretofore affronted majority's sentiments.

From a third direction, a more familiar cohort of conservative, mainly southern Democrats has bristled at the left-egalitarian, so-

cially liberal presence in the party all along. This source of tension goes back to the New Deal. Although the black electoral empowerment ensuing from the 1965 Voting Rights Act effectively bolstered the relatively moderate wing of the Democratic Party in the South by driving its most right-wing elements to the GOP, white southern Democratic elites have remained the party's most consistently conservative force. (In this context, after all, "relatively moderate" is defined in relation to reactionaries such as U.S. senators John Stennis and James Eastland in Mississippi, U.S. representative John Rarick and Governor John McKeithen in Louisiana, Georgia's governor Lester Maddox, and South Carolina's senator Strom Thurmond.)

In addition to concerns about black prominence, many conservative southern Democrats are disturbed by the rise of environmentalist, civil libertarian, gay rights, abortion rights, and other feminist constituencies within the party. Even "moderates"—a category mainly including those white Democrats who have adapted the familiar style of biracial brokerage politics to the new environment—express discomfiture that the Democrats command electoral support of only a minority among whites. (That this formulation does not beg questions as to why an electoral majority of *whites*, rather than a majority of the general electorate, should be seen as the standard of political health is a revealing aspect of the current discourse.)

This element of the Democratic coalition asserted itself conspicuously first in Jimmy Carter's candidacy, as Carter went on to become the most conservative Democratic president since Woodrow Wilson, at least up until then. Instructively, this was also the segment of the party from which the Democratic Leadership Council, the organizational and ideological center of the New Liberalism, sprang after Walter Mondale's defeat in the 1984 presidential campaign.

These three tendencies overlap programmatically, certainly, but they also differ significantly. Neoliberals are not necessarily concerned with directing public policy to inculcate virtue; their objectives run more toward greasing markets, and they are as likely as not to be libertarian on social issues that have no direct economic or budgetary consequences. Communitarians' notions of social compact at least leave space for assertions of corporations' obligations to the communities in which they operate, notions that appeal to neither neoliberals nor southern conservatives. And the latter's associations with a politics that is overtly antiegalitarian and authoritarian,

and at least borderline racist, sexist, nativist, and homophobic, do not comport well with either neoliberals' or communitarians' intimations of progressive sensibilities.

Not unlike the Republican right's ostensibly unstable coalition of fiscal, social, and religious conservatives, the rather disparate tendencies that make up the New Liberalism cohere around a set of affectively resonant but fluid symbols and clearly identified common adversaries. A unifying programmatic rhetoric emphasizes the need for political flexibility based on pragmatic adjustment to the requirements of global economic competition and a changed national mood, criticizes the social movements of the 1960s for allegedly turning toward narrow identity politics, and calls for an agenda that supposedly re-connects with a traditional social base anchored among working-class and middle-class whites, who are depicted as social conservatives concerned with "bread-and-butter" or economic issues. The claim is that such a focus would facilitate re-creation of a broad, majoritarian coalition by deemphasizing potentially divisive, "hot-button" social issues associated with identity politics.

Of course, what neoliberals, southern conservatives, and communitarians mean by economic bread-and-butter issues often differs, particularly as the communitarian camp also extends to association with an at least nominal populism that sometimes approaches a class politics. In part, these differences are muted through nostalgic evocations of the "traditional" Democratic coalition that emerged around the New Deal as the model of a successfully majoritarian politics. They also are obscured by artifacts of that model: a presumptive elision of the distinction between economic growth and redistribution, the related presumption that stimulating private-sector growth contributes by definition to general social well-being, and a corollary that the benefits of such growth automatically filter equitably through the population, the shopworn faith that a "rising tide lifts all boats." Significantly, however, this nostalgia for the New Deal coalition overlooks its central commitment to the principle that government has an obligation to mobilize public resources to sustain the general welfare and to curb the excesses of private wealth and the injustices and irrationalities of the market.

The language of responsibility is central to resolving the New Liberalism's centrifugal tendencies. Communitarian and conservative briefs against conventional left-liberalism's "permissiveness" equally meld into calls to restore the balance between rights and responsibil-

ities. Neoliberalism's market-based openness on social issues equally comports with the language of responsibility: The line on abortion rights is to be held for those who can afford to pay for them, out-of-wedlock childbearing should be tolerated only for women who can support the children on their own, and commitment to racial integration presumes class homogeneity.

What makes this language of responsibility so effective a rallying cry for the different strains of the New Liberalism, however, is that it is a subtly coded proxy for a more familiar racial discourse that centers on rejection of the pursuit of racial equality. Much as in the late nineteenth century, exhortations to retreat from the struggle against racial injustice have become both objective and pretext for a rightward shift in the ideological and programmatic consensus of liberal politics.

A century ago, in the wake of Reconstruction, liberal Republicans' defection from the cause of black freedpeople anchored a broader reaction against egalitarian political agendas. A proliferation of new scientific theories justifying racial, gender, and class inequalities reflected and legitimized that shift. A consensus formed among elites that government did not have the capacity to secure blacks' civil rights, though it obviously did have the capacity to support railroad development and "pacify" the Native American population in the West. A discourse glorifying self-reliance and disparaging "dependence" spread through political debate and popular culture. Horatio Alger's stories of moral rectitude and character development exemplify that discourse most familiarly to us; it was also in that context and largely through that discourse that Booker T. Washington rose to prominence as an advocate of black self-help, which was a counsel of political quietism and acceptance of white supremacy.

A conciliationist wing of the Republican Party successfully agitated for a view that the party needed to shed its identification with the intrinsically divisive race issue and build a majoritarian consensus around an economic program. (As a formulation, the neutral-sounding "race issue" already marked a concession; it—then, as now—leaves space for an equivalence between the interests of advocates and foes of racial equality.) That strategy, proponents maintained, would serve blacks even better because removing their status from the limelight of political debate would make it possible to improve their condition without inflaming white opposition.

The U.S. Supreme Court undercut the legal apparatus of civil rights enforcement, arguing that such measures—for example, the 1875

Civil Rights Law—granted blacks unfair special advantages, and the Court shaped these arguments mainly through a formalistic rhetoric that was insistently abstracted from the specific facts of racial oppression in American politics either in general or at that historical moment. That is to say, the Court justified the proceeding attack on black Americans' civil rights by willfully overlooking social and political realities and appealing to what was in effect an abstract standard of color-blind justice. Moreover, white supremacist southern legislatures typically took care to craft their strategies of disfranchisement on similarly color-blind bases.

If this sounds eerily familiar, it should. Indeed, the parallels between racial reaction at this century's end and the last's grow steadily more striking and should give us pause as we are swept along with the New Liberalism's momentum. It has frequently been remarked that black Americans are the mine canaries for this society's social problems—first to be afflicted, as well as hardest hit, by structural change and egalitarian initiatives and harbinger of the fate of others. To some extent, that unfortunate role is a function simply of blacks being one of the nation's poorest and most vulnerable populations, though black Americans' persistence in that status requires explanation. (The relentless recurrences of scientific racism are impelled by the will to explain that persisting inequality as a consequence of blacks' essential defectiveness.) To a greater extent, this role is the result of racial targeting, whether strategic or otherwise.

Using race—more specifically, opposition to blacks—as a foundation for political solidarity among whites who on that basis support policies and programs that might otherwise disadvantage them is a motif in American politics that can be traced back through the white supremacist consolidation in the South at the end of the nineteenth century, to the formation of the antebellum Jacksonian coalition, and all the way to Bacon's Rebellion in the 1670s. This history by itself should suffice to fuel skepticism regarding the New Liberalism's interpretation of the American realpolitik and the strategic and programmatic responses it proposes. That is certainly the perspective around which this book coheres.

The authors whose work makes up this book share the view that the New Liberalism is part of an emergent orthodoxy on race and inequality that is wrongheaded and intellectually inadequate, as well as dangerous and politically retrograde. The chapters that follow challenge the new orthodoxy's general features and provide an alter-

native account of the ways that racial stratification is built into the texture of American political life and public policy, including the New Deal coalition romanticized by many proponents of the New Liberalism as a race-transcendent, harmonious formation. The authors propose policy and strategic directions consistent with that account and argue concretely and forcefully for the need to maintain and expand the struggle against racial inequality as an element of a larger struggle against social injustice and for a more humane world.

Philip Klinkner examines Bill Clinton's career as an expression of the New Liberalism's emergence and concrete substance, demonstrating how the Clinton presidency exemplifies the mind-set and program of the New Liberalism in power. Indeed, an element of Clinton's political genius is that he has variously and simultaneously embodied each of the main strains—neoliberal, communitarian, and southern conservative—that constitute the New Liberalism's base. Micaela di Leonardo and Brett Williams, respectively, dissect two of the principal ideological mystifications that undergird the New Liberalism's prelapsarian narrative of political decline: the morality tale of racial/ethnic succession and the ideological use of the notion of family. Williams and di Leonardo debunk the culturalist premises on which those mystifications—which are by and large racist arguments by proxy—rest. These authors present alternative interpretations grounded in a sophisticated examination of the empirical realities of contemporary American patterns of household and kinship organization and racial/ethnic stratification and their foundations in the dynamics of political economy and public policy.

Michael K. Brown lays out a critical overview of the racialized origins and basis of the segmented welfare state that emerged from the New Deal, and Dennis Judd provides a similarly fine-grained argument regarding the history of federal urban policy. Chapters by Mimi Abramovitz and Ann Withorn, and Larry Bennett and Adolph Reed Jr. examine instances of the New Liberalism's current approaches to social welfare and urban policy—the obscene debacle of the 1996 welfare reform and contemporary initiatives in urban redevelopment policy. Each of these chapters grounds analysis of the substance of the specific policy initiatives in a critique of its ideological and political foundations.

Stephen Steinberg rebuts those who argue that affirmative action is divisive or superfluous or that it does more harm than good. He demystifies the discussion around affirmative action policies to focus

on the real problems they are designed to address. Alex Willingham similarly clarifies the terms of debate around voting rights enforcement and reaffirms the need for continued efforts to preserve and expand political participation.

Preston Smith and Willie Legette examine two of the most prominent manifestations of the current ideological environment within black politics. Smith dissects the rhetoric of self-help that has gained standing in black American political discourse and lays bare its conservative and quietistic roots and implications. Legette turns a critical lens toward the currently pervasive imagery of a special crisis among black males; he concludes, based on careful examination of the arguments of its proponents and assessment of socioeconomic conditions among black men and women, that the notion of a special *male* crisis is without justification except as a rationale for male priority in black political life and gender relations.

Finally, Rogers M. Smith presents a synoptic account of the recurring pattern of partial victories over racial inequality and reaction against that progress from the 1790s to the present, noting similarities between current arguments for turning away from the goal of equality and those evinced in earlier periods of reaction. He proposes a way to reformulate the warrants of liberal egalitarian politics on more positive theoretical and programmatic grounds that focus on guaranteeing all members of society access to the requirements for effective participation in its life and institutions.

As a group, these chapters take the New Liberalism apart, examine and expose its racist underpinnings, content, and objectives, and they suggest ways to reorient the terms of political debate on grounds that both more accurately represent the dynamics shaping American life and presume an unambiguous commitment to egalitarian goals and values. The authors are united in the belief that this is an important and necessary intervention into a political discourse that takes an increasing human toll as it slides ever more to the right.

PART ONE

The New Orthodoxy on Race and Inequality



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I

Bill Clinton and the Politics of the New Liberalism

Philip A. Klinkner

ON MAY 2, 1997, President Bill Clinton spoke at the opening of the new memorial to Franklin D. Roosevelt. At this ceremony, Clinton praised FDR as “the greatest President” of this century for his belief in “the duty we owe to ourselves, to one another, to our beloved nation, and increasingly to our fellow travelers on this small planet.”¹

Yet only hours earlier, rather than honoring these very same duties, Bill Clinton had ignored them by agreeing to a balanced budget compromise with congressional Republicans. This agreement rested largely upon cuts in Medicare and Medicaid and included significant tax cuts, the bulk of which accrued to the richest Americans. The agreement built upon and extended the budget developed by Clinton and the Republicans the previous year, the most important aspect of which was the abolition of the federal guarantee of assistance to poor Americans under Aid to Families with Dependent Children, one of the central accomplishments of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Together, these agreements almost exactly inverted the programmatic legacy of Roosevelt’s New Deal by cutting programs for the poor and working class and providing tax cuts for the wealthy.² Thus, in one day Bill Clinton neatly symbolized the Democratic

I want to thank Rogers Smith for his assistance with this chapter.

Party's abandonment of the liberal legacy first forged by Franklin Roosevelt.³

This abandonment represented the culmination of the Democratic Party's "New Liberalism." Though presented in many different forms by many different voices, the central tenets of the New Liberalism claimed that the traditional liberalism espoused by the Democratic Party from the 1930s to the 1960s was no longer relevant or politically practical. Not only were traditional liberalism's economic policies unsuited for the market über alles ethos of the 1980s and 1990s, the New Liberals argued, but also liberalism's emphasis on equality and justice for all was increasingly unpopular and an affront to "traditional" values.

Although historically myopic and laced with selective biases both overt and covert, the New Liberalism had come to dominate Democratic Party politics and discourse by the late 1980s. Consequently, the advocates of the New Liberalism believed that the only way for the Democrats to win at the presidential level and to govern effectively was to shed their traditional support for and identification with the poor, the working class, and minorities and to reach out to disaffected whites and economic elites by moving to the right on issues such as crime, affirmative action, welfare, and economic justice.

In many ways, the ascent of the New Liberalism parallels the career of Bill Clinton. As governor of Arkansas, chair of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), presidential candidate, and president, Bill Clinton openly declared his belief in the New Liberalism and structured many of his political decisions and policy proposals around its basic precepts. In fact, Clinton's rise to the White House and his experience as president present a textbook example of the New Liberalism in practice. This chapter examines the association between Bill Clinton and the New Liberalism and in doing so analyzes the fundamental flaws in the ideology and political strategy of the New Liberalism.

Bill Clinton's association with the principles expounded by the New Liberalism stretches back to his 1980 defeat for reelection after one term as governor of Arkansas. By all accounts, the defeat was one of the most painful and important events in Clinton's political life, and from it he drew the lesson that he could not actively push a liberal agenda in the face of a dominantly conservative and racially polarized state. After returning to the governor's mansion in 1982,

Clinton recast himself into the moderate, "New South" image that has characterized him since. With his policies and governing style, he sought to walk a fine line among the state's various racial and economic groups. While pushing a limited number of ostensibly progressive programs, such as school reform (financed with a regressive sales tax), Clinton avidly supported the state's use of capital punishment, gave only lukewarm support to a failed effort at a state civil rights bill, and made sure that his tax and environmental policies were acceptable to Arkansas's business interests. All of this seemed designed to reassure Arkansas's whites that he was unwilling to challenge the state's economic and racial status quo.⁴

Clinton's strategy of racial and economic moderation proved successful in Arkansas and allowed him to move into the national political arena through the DLC. The DLC first began in the aftermath of Walter Mondale's loss in 1984, as several Democratic elected officials sought to create a conservative Democratic organization that not only would inoculate them from accusations that they were too liberal for their constituents, but also would serve as a vehicle to shift the party rightward. Although the DLC criticized traditional liberal Democrats on a range of issues, the topic of race was never far below the surface of its discussions. Few were as open as former LBJ aide Harry McPherson, who declared after Mondale's loss: "Blacks own the Democratic Party. . . . White Protestant male Democrats are an endangered species."⁵ Nevertheless, many of those associated with the DLC believed that the Democrats had become beholden to various "special interests," usually perceived as blacks and other minorities, women, and gays and lesbians. These were precisely the terms the Reagan Republicans used to attack the Democratic Party.⁶

Criticizing the Democrats for their connection to special interests was rather ironic for the DLC, given its financial reliance on corporate lobbyists and political action committees. According to John Hale:

The annual budget of the DLC's early years was around \$500,000, much of it raised in large contributions from executives, lawyer, lobbyists, and other Democratic financial patrons supportive of the DLC's goals, and/or its early stalwarts. . . . The annual budget of the post-1988 institutionalized DLC pushed the \$2 million mark, with corporate sponsorships bringing in substantial portions. Of 100 DLC "Sustaining Members" in 1991-92, 57 were corporations and another 12 were

professional or trade associations. The energy, health care, insurance, pharmaceutical, retail, and tobacco industries were all represented.⁷

The efforts of the DLC to back away from the Democrats' traditional concern for racial equality and economic justice are evident in its policy statements. Though ostensibly a rejection of both traditional liberalism and Reagan-Bush conservatism, the statements of the DLC often steered closer to the latter. According to one DLC missive, as a result of the Democrats' failings, "since the late 1960s, the public has come to associate liberalism with tax and spend policies that contradict the interests of average families; with welfare policies that foster dependence rather than self-reliance; with softness toward perpetrators of crime and indifference toward its victims; with ambivalence toward the assertion of American values and interests abroad; and with an adversarial stance toward mainstream moral and cultural values."⁸ Moreover, the DLC often echoed conservative Republicans by emphasizing such code words as "law and order," "traditional values," and "personal responsibility."⁹

Much like the Republicans, the DLC also used white fears of racial equality to drum up support for its conservative economic policies. This was most evident during Clinton's tenure as DLC chair from 1990 to 1991. At their 1991 convention in Cleveland, DLC delegates, who included "lobbyists for several major corporations that helped underwrite the three-day gathering,"¹⁰ took a page from George Bush's and David Duke's playbook and approved a platform plank opposing racial "quotas." Clinton claimed disingenuously that the statement was a "reaffirmation of civil rights and affirmative action."¹¹ To those who saw the statement as an effort to roll back the Democrats' commitment to racial equality, he offered the wan promise that as the DLC grew larger, their voices would ultimately be heard.

The relationship between Bill Clinton and the DLC was a symbiotic one. Clinton gained not only a national platform but also an alternative party structure and a corps of political and financial supporters from which to launch his eventual presidential bid. The DLC gained a political leader who could help to package and popularize its neoliberal policy positions. According to Al From, the DLC's executive director, "This guy [Clinton] understood the importance of values politics better than anybody else."¹² Most importantly, the

DLC gained a potential presidential candidate, someone who could serve as a vehicle for the DLC's message in the 1992 primaries and, hopefully, into the general election and the White House.¹³

Along with the DLC, Clinton sought to identify himself with several of the journalists-cum-analysts who during the late 1980s and early 1990s worked to lead the Democratic Party away from its traditional support for racial equality. Clinton often cited the work of E. J. Dionne and Thomas and Mary Edsall in his speeches.¹⁴ Both Dionne and the Edsalls argued that the plight of the Democrats stemmed from their identification with special-interest politics and abandonment of white working class concerns.¹⁵ Throughout the campaign, Clinton attempted unsuccessfully to solicit Dionne for political advice, and at one point early in the 1992 campaign Clinton characterized himself as the candidate best able to overcome the racial divide described by the Edsalls.¹⁶ Clinton even went so far as to provide several supportive quotes and a book jacket blurb for journalist Peter Brown's *Minority Party*, a book whose racism is matched only by its astoundingly faulty analysis. According to Bill Clinton: "In *Minority Party*, Peter Brown argues that most middle class Americans who believe we Democrats care more about minorities and the poor than about them, are not racists, but are acting out of perceived self-interest. He offers a challenge to Americans that is worth listening to, and Democrats should listen."¹⁷

And listen Clinton did, structuring his presidential campaign along the pattern suggested by Brown and others who advocated that the Democrats retreat from their commitment to racial equality and comply with the fears and prejudices of conservative whites. Presenting himself as a "New Democrat," Clinton picked up on many of the terms used so effectively by the Republicans. His "New Covenant" offered government support in return for greater "personal responsibility." In particular, he promised to "end welfare as we know it." To those on welfare who "refuse" to work, Clinton warned, "we will do with you. We will not do for you."¹⁸ The Clinton campaign, however, did little to combat the misperception that the major problems with welfare were chiefly those of irresponsible minority recipients, nor did it provide many suggestions as to how the country would "do with" those who lost public aid.

Furthermore, Clinton's policy appeals to conservative whites did not speak as loudly as the symbolism of his actions. In January

1992, in the crucial days before the New Hampshire primary and in the midst of the Gennifer Flowers contretemps, Clinton departed from the campaign trail to return to Arkansas for the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a brain-damaged and mentally incapacitated black man. Clinton's return to Arkansas was not necessary, and the execution seemed charged with political calculation. It sent an unmistakable message to conservative whites that a President Clinton would have little sympathy for black criminals—even if, like Rector, they had the mental capacity of a child and no ability to understand their fate. (When asked if he wanted to finish his dessert at his last meal, Rector said he would save it for later.) As Democratic consultant David Garth described Clinton: "He put someone to death who had only part of a brain. You can't find them any tougher than that."¹⁹

During the Los Angeles riots, Clinton sent a similar signal by failing to make a strong statement. Instead, he merely echoed George Bush's law-and-order line. When Clinton did finally speak out about the riots, he denounced racism and racial divisions, but he also suggested that such divisions stemmed, in part, from "the culture of poverty" and dependency in the inner cities. That position was strikingly similar to the Bush administration's assertion that the riots resulted from "failed" Great Society programs.²⁰ Moreover, Clinton also expressed his understanding of the "fears" of whites who "have been scared for so long that they have fled to the suburbs of America to places like Simi Valley."²¹ In so doing, he communicated not only his understanding but also his receptivity to the desires of whites to preserve many of the traditional racial arrangements they found comfortable.

All of this was but prologue to one of the defining moments of the Clinton campaign: his public feud with Jesse Jackson over the remarks of rap singer and activist Sister Souljah. In June 1992, Clinton used his address before Jackson's Rainbow Coalition to criticize the group for earlier giving a forum to Sister Souljah. In a newspaper interview after the Los Angeles riots, she had purportedly stated her belief that the violence was "wise" and that it was justified for blacks to kill whites.

Despite the claims of the Clinton campaign, the incident was not a spontaneous comment triggered by Clinton's conscience and revulsion at racial violence. Instead, it was part of a planned and deliberate

strategy to reassure white voters of Clinton's toughness by attacking black extremism and alienating Jesse Jackson. Several points reinforce this assessment. First, Sister Souljah's claim that her effort to convey the views of black gang members was misquoted (which was met with great skepticism by the media) seems at least plausible, as the following transcript of the relevant part of her interview indicates:

Q: But even the people themselves who were perpetrating the violence, did they think it was wise? Was that wise reasoned action?

Sister Souljah: Yeah, it was wise. I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? You understand what I'm saying? In other words, white people, this government and that mayor were well aware of the fact that black people were dying every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. *So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, or above and beyond dying, when they would kill their own kind?* (Emphasis added)²²

Here Sister Souljah appears to be putting herself in the mind of a gang member and contending not that she personally believed killing whites was wise, but that for those blacks who wrongly engage in killing, it makes at least as much sense for them to kill whites as blacks. Nevertheless, the opportunity in Sister Souljah's words appears to have been too good for the Clinton campaign to pass up through a charitable (or even accurate) reading.

Second, many of Clinton's advisers had been encouraging him to confront Jackson publicly in order to reassure white voters of his toughness with Democratic Party special interests. According to Bob Woodward, after the speech "Clinton told [campaign advisers Paul] Begala and [George] Stephanopoulos tersely, 'Well, you got your story.'" ²³ Third, Clinton aides made sure to tip off several reporters that Clinton would use the occasion to distance himself from Jackson. Finally, Clinton originally intended to give a similar speech immediately after the Los Angeles riots but decided to wait for a more appropriate event.²⁴

The response to his criticism of Sister Souljah and, implicitly, Jesse Jackson, was all that Clinton could have hoped. Republican polls indicated that 68 percent of the electorate were aware of the incident—twice the number who were aware of Clinton's economic

plan. Moreover, whites approved of Clinton's statement by a three-to-one margin, whereas blacks disapproved by the same margin.²⁵ As one blue-collar white explained, "The day he told off that fucking Jackson is the day he got my vote."²⁶

Clinton's attack also received prominent play from those journalists who were publicly calling for the Democrats to distance themselves from blacks. The day after Clinton's comments to the Rainbow Coalition, a *Washington Post* article by Tom Edsall, "Clinton Stuns Rainbow Coalition," appeared on the front page and covered twenty-five column-inches.²⁷ In contrast, a *New York Times* article by Gwen Ifill appeared on page thirty and received only sixteen column-inches under the less dramatic title of "Clinton at Jackson Meeting: Warmth, and Some Friction."²⁸ Follow-up articles and editorial commentaries on the incident tended to reflect the same biases by misinterpreting Sister Souljah's remarks, attacking Jesse Jackson's petulance, and reporting "biracial" support for Clinton's statement.²⁹ More broadly, Joe Klein, of *New York* magazine and *Newsweek*, praised Clinton's concern about, among other things, "the debilitating consequences of racial preference."³⁰ Sidney Blumenthal of the *New Republic* extolled Clinton as being at the center of the rethinking of liberalism that he dubbed the "Conversation."³¹ Candidates, such as Iowa senator Tom Harkin, who advocated reinvigorating the Democrats' labor-left coalition were treated as anachronisms by the dominantly neoliberal press corps.

Though less dramatically than during the Sister Souljah incident, Bill Clinton spent the rest of the campaign reassuring conservative whites. By selecting Senator Albert Gore Jr. of Tennessee as his running mate, Clinton formed one of the most conservative Democratic tickets in living memory. As Andrew Hacker pointed out, the Democratic platform in 1992 was the first in a half century to make "no mention of redressing racial injustice."³² In his campaign manifesto *Putting People First*, Clinton scarcely mentioned the word "race," other than opposing racial quotas.³³ The book devotes specific chapters to the interests of farmers, persons with AIDS, artists, children, the disabled, the elderly, veterans, and women, but none to blacks. And as Hacker points out, the "Civil Rights" chapter "devotes more space to biases based on physical disabilities and sexual preference than it does to race."³⁴ Campaign ads reinforced these policy positions. Clinton's second ad of the general election campaign touted

his welfare reform plan. Another described Clinton and Gore as “a new generation of Democrats. . . . They don’t think the way the old Democratic party did. They’ve called for an end to welfare as we know it. . . . They’ve sent a strong signal to criminals by supporting the death penalty.”³⁵

Clinton’s strategy of ignoring or obscuring issues of racial equality appears to have had the desired effect. The Bush campaign was unable to use racial issues against Clinton in the same way that it had used Willie Horton against Michael Dukakis in 1988. Though Clinton’s weak position on civil rights caused black turnout to drop, increased white support for the Democratic ticket more than offset black abstentions. Nevertheless, Clinton’s increased competitiveness among whites seems to have resulted from Ross Perot’s draining of white support from George Bush rather than from a surge in support for the Democrats. In 1988, Dukakis received 40 percent of the white vote. Four years later, Bill Clinton managed only 39 percent.³⁶ Overall, Clinton’s 43 percent of the popular vote was 3 percentage points less than Dukakis’s 46 percent. In the end, the best one can say of Clinton’s gamble of offsetting lower black turnout with increased support among whites was that it worked only in the context of a three-way race. Furthermore, the 1992 results indicated that braver strategies might have succeeded with the right candidate. Clinton did not try to be that candidate.

After his election, he expressed a desire for a cabinet that “looks like America,” but the key was “looks.” Clinton’s actual choices were a careful blend of women, minorities, and white men, few of whom (especially those in important cabinet positions) had the inclination or political stature to call for a strong liberal agenda. In fact, when women’s groups called for the appointment of more women in his initial cabinet picks, he lashed out, calling them “bean counters” who were “playing quota games.”³⁷

Clinton reacted similarly when conservatives scurrilously attacked Lani Guinier, his first choice to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. Conservatives pinned her with the racially charged label of “quota queen” for her views on voting rights, even though she actually proposed innovative ways to represent the interests of most blacks without race-conscious districting. Rather than answer these distorted caricatures of his old friend’s views, Clinton unceremoniously withdrew her nomination. The position then sat empty

for over a year, hindering the work of civil rights enforcement. Clinton's eventual appointee, Deval Patrick, did not find his boss any more supportive of that work. Patrick declined to appear with the president at Martin Luther King's Atlanta birthplace in January 1995 after finding out that Clinton would make no mention of civil rights.³⁸

Though Clinton and other proponents of the New Liberalism had claimed that deemphasizing race was necessary for the Democrats to achieve more liberal economic policies, his first year's agenda offered little of the sort. Even though subsequent conventional wisdom claimed Clinton foolishly lurched to the left during that period, this assessment was mostly based on his quickly retracted endorsement of gays in the military. Clinton did propose a relatively small economic stimulus package, a portion of which was directed at inner cities, but he made only a halfhearted effort to cut off a successful Senate Republican filibuster of the package. He also reneged on his campaign promise of a middle-class tax cut in favor of deficit reduction, including a regressive hike in the gasoline tax. This strategy met with the approval of Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan and the bond market, but it did little to aid the Democratic Party's traditional constituencies. Though Clinton advocated health care reform, he rejected a progressive single-payer system and offered a "centrist" proposal that simultaneously confused the public, provided ammunition for Republican critics, disappointed liberals, and offered maximum influence and profits for large insurance companies. In November 1993, the administration pulled out all the stops to push the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) through a reluctant Congress, against the opposition of organized labor and most Democrats. Ironically, the same skill and effort had been nowhere seen during the filibuster of the economic stimulus package.

When liberals began to criticize him for these policy stands, Clinton once again responded angrily. During the NAFTA debate, he blasted the "real roughshod, muscle-bound tactics" of organized labor.³⁹ Later, an enraged Clinton told journalist William Greider, "I have fought more damn battles here for more things than any president has in 20 years, with the possible exception of Reagan's first budget, and not gotten one damn bit of credit from the knee-jerk liberal press, and I am sick and tired of it and you can put that in your damn article."⁴⁰ The fact that these battles were rarely on behalf of

liberal measures, and none were efforts to promote racial equality, did not seem relevant to the president.

At the end of his first year in office, President Clinton visited Memphis to address a gathering of black ministers at the same church where Martin Luther King had given his last sermon. Though purporting to honor the memory of King, Clinton abandoned his spirit. King, who had come to Memphis in 1968 to help organize black sanitation workers, saw the crucial role of economic injustice in the plight of black Americans, but no mention of this appeared in the president's speech. Instead, Clinton used the event to stress that there was little the government could or should do to help reduce inequality. The problem resulted not so much from racism or economic injustice as from a lack of personal "responsibility" and violent behavior on the part of many blacks and poor people. Furthermore, the president made the curious assertion that such matters as broken families, illegitimacy, teen births, and crime by blacks were fundamentally an "abuse" of the freedom won by King and the civil rights movement.⁴¹ In doing so, the president sounded less like King than like the opponents of Reconstruction who had claimed that blacks were unable to handle their new freedom.

In 1994, Clinton, burdened by more in a career-long series of allegations regarding his own lack of "personal responsibility" (both personal and financial), seemed strangely inactive as his health care reform proposal sank on Capitol Hill. A combination of special-interest demagoguery and Republican opposition destroyed his most progressive policy proposal. In contrast, Clinton was not passive in the fight over the 1994 crime bill. Among other things, this legislation funded extensive construction of new prisons and expanded the death penalty without providing a mechanism to make sure that it would not be used in a racially discriminatory fashion.

After losing a close procedural vote in the House, the president quickly hit the hustings. In one of a series of speeches, he asked a group of black ministers (seemingly Clinton's audience of choice when seeking to revive his political fortunes) to pray for passage of the bill—something he had not suggested for economic aid to inner cities.⁴² In another speech, again to black ministers, he argued that the crime bill was necessary because "there's a disproportionate number of black kids in those pine boxes."⁴³ Clinton's logic suggested a gruesome trade-off—save the lives of some blacks by passing

a bill that would likely put more blacks to death. Eventually, the bill passed, but only after the president compromised with Republicans by shifting it even more from crime prevention to expanded policing and incarceration.

Clinton's conservative posturing proved to no avail. Unable or unwilling to offer a progressive program that would constructively address voters' economic anxieties, their disgust with corrupt campaign finances, or their worries about racial change, Clinton and the Democrats were repudiated in the 1994 election. They lost fifty-four seats in the House, eight in the Senate, and control of Congress for the first time since 1952. In fact, Clinton's various moves to the middle may have hurt more than helped in 1994. Between 1990 and 1994, voter turnout among those making \$50,000 a year or more rose from 59.2 percent to 60.1 percent, but turnout among those making under \$5,000 fell from 32.2 percent to 19.9 percent, and from 30.9 percent to 23.3 percent for those making between \$5,000 and \$10,000. In addition, whereas white turnout rose slightly, from 46.7 percent in 1990 to 46.9 percent in 1994, black turnout fell from 39.2 percent to 37 percent and Hispanic turnout from 23.1 percent to 19.1 percent.⁴⁴

Following the 1994 election, those calling for the Democrats to further distance themselves from civil rights and anything that might be associated in the public mind with racial minorities were in full cry. Soon after the election, the December 5, 1994, *New Republic* ran the following cover:

THEY BLEW IT

The fundamental STRATEGIC MISTAKE of the CLINTON PRESIDENCY is now clear. If President Clinton had pushed for WELFARE REFORM rather than HEALTH CARE REFORM in 1994, we would now be talking about a great DEMOCRATIC REALIGNMENT, rather than a great REPUBLICAN REALIGNMENT.

In the follow-up article, journalist Mickey Kaus fantasized: "Imagine how the midterm election might have looked if Clinton had spent 1994 pushing his tough, popular proposal—standing up to the Congressional Black Caucus, fighting off paleoliberals and neoconservatives, overcoming gridlock, in general showing he is the forceful leader voters have now concluded he's not. Imagine . . . oh, it's too depress-

ing.”⁴⁵ Strikingly, Kaus chose the Congressional Black Caucus as the principal target for a presidential display of toughness, insisting that this path would make Clinton more “popular.” In *Newsweek*, Joe Klein tried to out-Gingrich Newt Gingrich by suggesting that “liberalism” could survive only if it buried the “counterculture McGovernism” that consisted of an “alliance” between “left-wing elitists” and the dreaded “black underclass.”⁴⁶

Clinton took these warnings to heart. Under the advice of Republican consultant Dick Morris, whose previous clients included Jesse Helms, Clinton followed a policy of “triangulation” in 1995–1996 by attempting to distance himself from both the Republicans and traditional liberal Democrats. The ensuing triangle was not an equilateral one, as Clinton positioned himself much more closely to Gingrich and the Republicans than to liberal Democrats. After all the months of political posturing and government shutdowns, Clinton and the Republican leadership in Congress agreed to settle their differences on the budget—largely on the backs of the poor, minorities, and immigrants. A report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that programs for the poor made up only 23 percent of the nondefense budget but accounted for over 50 percent of the reductions enacted during the 104th Congress (1995–1996).⁴⁷

The most significant piece of legislation passed during the 104th Congress was the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. The most important feature of this legislation was its abandonment of the federal government’s guarantee of assistance to poor families, first tendered six decades earlier during Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Welfare is now left to the state governments, assisted—for the time being—with block grants from the federal government. By shifting this responsibility to the states, the legislation ignored the history of abusive and racist welfare policies in many states. Furthermore, the new system raises the possibility of a “race to the bottom” as states compete with one another to cut welfare benefits as a way of reducing caseloads and demands on public funds. Finally, the legislation installs work requirements for recipients but does little to provide adequate resources for the job training, transportation, and child care necessary for those on welfare to find meaningful work while raising their children.

Though the Welfare Reform Act was largely the creation of a Republican Congress, Bill Clinton nonetheless rightly claims much of

the responsibility for this legislation, making his efforts to distance himself from some of its features debatable. Seeking in 1992 to inoculate himself from charges that he was too much of a traditional liberal, Clinton famously set the agenda by declaring that he would “end welfare as we know it.” As a Democrat attacking welfare, Clinton succeeded only in shifting the welfare policy debate even further to the right. Not surprisingly, Republicans quickly responded by coming up with their own even more Dickensian welfare overhaul plans. As the 1996 election loomed, Clinton was forced to sign a bill that even he acknowledged was excessively punitive, lest he be seen as too liberal on the issue, even though he was then leading Bob Dole by large margins in nearly every poll. Nor is the record of the congressional Democrats any better, since a majority of them supported the legislation. Among Democratic senators running for reelection in 1996, only Paul Wellstone of Minnesota had the courage to oppose the bill. He won handily that November.⁴⁸

Since the passage of this legislation, supporters have pointed to a sharp drop in welfare caseloads. Such declines have indeed been impressive in some areas, but the number of people on welfare had been declining even before the passage of the law. Additionally, this drop in welfare cases comes during what is perhaps the best job market in over twenty years. The true test of a safety net comes when people are falling. Therefore, the verdict remains out on the new legislation until the next economic downturn. Even with a booming economy, recent reports by several private charities noted a sharp upturn in those seeking assistance from food kitchens and homeless shelters. Furthermore, the new law’s two-year time limit for assistance has yet to expire, leaving open the question of what will happen to those who are unable to find work once their support is cut off.⁴⁹

Clinton proved almost equally impotent when it came to protecting affirmative action from conservative attacks in Congress, the courts, and the states. Though his policy of “Mend it; don’t end it” upheld the basic goals of affirmative action, Clinton agreed there were serious problems with some existing policies and vowed to eliminate any program that “creates a quota, creates preferences for unqualified individuals, creates reverse discrimination or continues even after its equal opportunity purposes have been achieved.”⁵⁰ Since, rightly or wrongly, critics were making those charges against

virtually every form of affirmative action, it was not clear what forms the president actually supported.

During the 1996 election campaign, Clinton sounded an even more defensive note. In his election year tract, he focused more on the failures and abuses of affirmative action than on its strengths.⁵¹ The same was true during one of the presidential debates. When asked about affirmative action, Clinton proudly asserted: "I've done more to eliminate programs—affirmative action programs—I didn't think were fair. And to tighten others up than my predecessors have since affirmative action's been around."⁵² He also referred only to affirmative action efforts to aid women without explicitly mentioning racial minorities. In addition, despite the fact that he was running well ahead of Dole in the state, Clinton refused to take a strong stand against the perversely named California Civil Rights Initiative, which called for an end to all state-sponsored affirmative action programs. He criticized it sharply only after the election.

Though he won reelection, Clinton's victory was hardly a triumph for the New Liberalism. In an analysis of the election results, Ruy Teixeira demonstrates that the increase in Democratic support from 1994 to 1996 came not from upper-income and highly educated suburban voters long targeted by the New Liberals, but rather from traditional Democrats at the lower ends of the class scale concerned with those issues identified with traditional liberalism—jobs, Social Security, Medicare, and education.⁵³

Whatever the reasons for Clinton's victory, it was a rather hollow triumph. Modeled directly on Ronald Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" campaign, Clinton's reelection effort set out hardly any second term agenda and certainly not a liberal one. Eschewing any major programmatic initiatives in his second term, he seems to have settled on a strategy of emphasizing small and mostly symbolic mini-issues, such as school uniforms, youth curfews, and ad campaigns against teen smoking and drug use. Although a few of these initiatives contain some merit, such as ensuring a minimum forty-eight-hour hospital stay for women giving birth, they do little, if anything, to meet the challenges of racism, growing economic inequality, and the increasing powerlessness of the poor and working classes. Even if Clinton had the willingness to push a more liberal agenda, his ability to do so has been gravely weakened by the scandals that have plagued his second term.

These scandals are not unrelated to Clinton's New Liberalism. By abandoning its traditional bases of support in party organizations, labor unions, community groups, and civil rights organizations, Clinton and other proponents of the New Liberalism have been forced to look elsewhere for the resources necessary to contest elections. Increasingly, this has meant corporate and other special-interest donations. In turn, the reliance on these donations has made it even easier, if not downright necessary, for the Democrats to jettison their traditional liberalism. Thus, Clinton and the Democratic Party's unseemly and perhaps even illegal fund-raising efforts in 1996 can be viewed as a direct outgrowth of their embrace of the New Liberalism. Even, oddly enough, the Monica Lewinsky scandal reflects on Clinton's New Liberalism. Amid all of the salacious details of the scandal, few have noticed the rank hypocrisy involved. After all, a central theme of Bill Clinton's national political career and of the New Liberalism more generally has been to preach the necessity of exercising "personal responsibility." This, of course, suggests that such statements were not principled credos but only so much political posturing.

Despite a rather unimpressive record on civil rights, brightened only by the fact that he is more liberal than the now thoroughly southernized Republicans, Bill Clinton maintains an image of himself as a racial healer. As he began his second term, President Clinton sought to use the issue of race as a way to burnish for the history books the thus far less-than-awe-inspiring accomplishments of his presidency.

To this end, in June 1997 Bill Clinton announced his Presidential Initiative on Race. The key aspect of this initiative was the appointment of a presidential commission on race relations. Though the president selected several thoughtful and respected individuals to form the commission, most notably his choice of the eminent historian John Hope Franklin as chair, the effort has amounted to little. When the committee submitted its report in September 1998, it was conspicuously lacking in substantive proposals, as seems to have been the intention of the Clinton White House. "There is timidity on this question," commented Thomas Kean, a member of the panel and a former Republican governor of New Jersey. "Race is very divisive. As the year wore on, people became—not the board, but people in the Administration—became concerned. We were not encouraged to be bold. My recommendation was much bolder than anything

contained in this report.”⁵⁴ At best, the initiative provided an ineffective but benign way for Clinton to play the role of therapist in chief. Rather than attempting the more controversial and expensive effort of putting forth substantive policies to deal with the continuing impact of racial exclusion and discrimination, the initiative allowed Clinton a low-cost way to create the impression of concern and action.

Yet the costs may not be so low. At worst, the president’s race initiative offered a distraction from the fact that he, the Democratic Party, and the nation in general have sounded an end to the modern era of civil rights reform. In his speeches on the subject, President Clinton has repeatedly stressed that the answer to the nation’s racial problems requires not positive governmental action, but a change in the hearts and habits of individual Americans. “We have torn down the barriers in our laws,” proclaims Clinton. “Now we must break down the barriers in our lives, our minds and our hearts.”⁵⁵

These words have an eerily familiar ring. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Republican presidents, then representing the liberal party on race, maintained a rhetorical sympathy for equal rights but disparaged any effort by the government to achieve them. Such views were also espoused by “progressive” Democrats of the era. As the limited scope of his race initiative has become clear, Clinton has expressed admiration for these very leaders. He has suggested that Rutherford B. Hayes and Grover Cleveland were progressive reformers who are today underappreciated; they were, he believes, combating bigotry and economic injustices as much as was possible in their circumstances.⁵⁶

Perhaps Bill Clinton is right that we live in a time of conservative ascendancy. But by tailoring the politics of his administration and of the Democratic Party to this conservatism, Clinton has not so much fought it as he has legitimated and perpetuated it. Furthermore, by advancing such a minimalist and conservative agenda, Clinton and other advocates of the New Liberalism are ignoring the best traditions of the Democratic Party and the needs of its potential coalition.

Throughout much of the history of the Democratic Party, especially from the 1930s to the 1960s, it has, albeit imperfectly, represented the interests of those disadvantaged by the status quo. Thus, the party’s reason for being was to advocate programs and policies that challenged, rather than accommodated, the status quo. Not all

of these efforts succeeded, but even when they did not, the party still managed to offer a distinctive vision for itself and to hope for future successes.

Such visionary leadership is the reason that Franklin Roosevelt is now honored with a monument, whereas such presidents as Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland are remembered only as mediocrities who failed to challenge the status quo and thus did nothing to advance the nation's welfare. Though only time will tell, it seems likely that Bill Clinton's presidency will be remembered among the latter.

2

“Why Can’t They Be Like Our Grandparents?” and Other Racial Fairy Tales

Micaela di Leonardo

THE CITY ON THE HILL has always willfully confused race with righteousness. Since the Puritans’ arrival, dominant American political narratives have emphasized the differential moral worth of racial/ethnic populations: whites versus Native Americans, Yankees versus Irish, planters versus slaves, native-born whites versus “the refuse of Europe,” and, on the West Coast, whites versus Mexicans and Asians. During the 1970s, the dominant morality play claimed to represent the United States with three characters—well-off WASPs, working-class white ethnics, and poor blacks (dealing Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans out of the game). In this version of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Goldilocks (the zeitgeist) rejects the first chair and porridge (WASPs) as too hard, cold, and sexless and the second (blacks) as too hot, irresponsible, and oversexed. The golden mean, Baby Bear’s choice, is white ethnics—warmer, more family and community oriented than WASPs, but not “disorganized” and “savage” like blacks.

Portions of this chapter have appeared as “Habits of the Cumbered Heart: White Ethnic Community and Women’s Culture as Invented Traditions,” in William Roseberry and Jay O’Brien, eds., *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining the Past in Anthropology and History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 234–252.

This Puritanical inheritance has been transformed, however, in the current climate of center-right convergence in national politics and in the process has lost its overtly racist character. But the raced narrative still lurks, penitento-fashion, beneath the new platitudes of the “era of limits,” of communitarianism, of the need for a rebirth of values, of the “politics of meaning.” In what follows, I illuminate both new and old paint and trace their historical and political interrelations. I first lay out the “impulse to cumber” in contemporary political discourse, then return to the Three Bears to consider the actual political-economic ground from which notions of white ethnicity arose. As we see, engaging in some detail with the politics of the 1970s gives us the prehistory of the politics of meaning, a sense of the genealogy of the contemporary usage of “community,” “rights,” and “responsibility.” And this genealogy is key to the rise of communitarianism and thus to the ideological knot at the center of the Democratic Leadership Council, Bill Clinton’s original electoral springboard and the source of the contemporary convergence between the Republican and Democratic Parties. To clarify this overpainting, I briefly spotlight two related contemporary political constructions, “women’s culture” and the “urban underclass,” and lay out their relation to the larger canvas.

Recent writing on the American temperament portrays contemporary U.S. citizens as a people without traditions, except perhaps the tradition of invented and individualizing social orders. Thus, Frances Fitzgerald chooses recently established communities with narrow membership criteria—an affluent white retirement development, a Christian cult, San Francisco’s gay neighborhoods—as exemplars of a broad-scale and continuous American turn against both the past and the larger society in attempts to establish utopian orders for a narrow elect.¹ Allan Bloom excoriates American popular culture, and thus America’s young, as vulgar, traditionless, and not uncoincidentally subject to the illogical and unnatural “fads” of leftist and feminist thought and action.² On the other end of the political spectrum, Russell Jacoby deplores the dying off of an early-to-mid-twentieth-century tradition of American public intellectual life and the retreat of radical intellectuals into an arid and hermetic scholasticism.³ Finally, and most instructively, Robert Bellah and his coauthors in their multiple-interview study *Habits of the Heart*, and in the subsequent *The Good Society*, determine that Americans primarily con-

ceive the self as unencumbered by dependent others, by community obligations, by institutions, by history.⁴ These authors' analysis underscores current images of protean American individualism, and the Bellah group has endorsed a new communitarian political movement calling for mandated "encumbering" (about which more follows).

Habits typifies recent evaluations of American cultural perceptions in other ways as well. The unencumbered selves—such as those making use of "therapeutic" or "managerial" modes of apprehending reality with which the authors find their informants struggling and which the authors wish to adjure us to discard—significantly are white, male, and middle class. This narrow conception of American selfhood is unsurprising when we consider both the authors' demographically skewed choice of interviewees and the prototypically elite primary historical "American Studies" texts to which they turn to flesh out their interviewees' hesitant statements—John Winthrop, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexis de Tocqueville.

Indeed, if we shift the focus to include all Americans, both as agents and as objects of the cultural construction of the self, we perceive instead an American landscape littered with images of very cumbered selves. Although the myth of the nineteenth-century pioneer or frontiersman lives on, it has been joined by those of rebellious black slaves, the planners and sojourners on the Underground Railroad, and the cooperative and contentious struggles of the suffragists. And present-day images reflected in mass media treatment include more than the unencumbered (white, middle-class, and largely male) urban and economic "pioneers"—gentrifiers in inner cities and entrepreneurs in new industries. These images also include the cumbered poor, mixed-sex groups of recent Latin, Caribbean, and Asian migrants to the United States who are financed by and arrive as kinspeople, gain jobs through and work with kin and compatriots, and live doubled and tripled up in apartments and homes throughout urban America. Even those migrants who travel to the United States alone and work in isolation from their kin and compatriots, such as the many thousands of Caribbean and Latin American women working as child-minders and domestic servants, find themselves very cumbered with their largely live-in status and the emotionally intense nature of child care and household labor for others.

The "American temper" or "ethos" is continually reinvented, constructed, and reconstructed in unadmitted relation to changing

demographics and political economy. And in configuring America from the Progressive Era to the present, “non-Other” Americans have added to notions of primitiveness and civilization the righteous theological language of morality plays and the Gradgrind terminology of neoclassical economics. What is useful is good and what is good is useful—but the calculus of utility and goodness is applied only to Others, never to “ourselves.” Again and again, when Others have attempted to wrest free the right to inclusion, to find an America that allows them equal citizenship, they (we) are driven to justify the claim with reference to the utility calculus. We raise your moral tone. We make contributions. Let us in.

Despite the fact that the very notion of an unencumbered self is, as Bellah et al. point out, a traditional American invention, scholars and popular cultural commentators associate “tradition” in the United States with *gemeinschaft*, groupness, interdependence, responsibility—with the state of cumberedness.⁵ Two American groups have popular cultural “traditions” in this sense: foreign peasantry and their descendants and all women. The Bellah group and other contemporary commentators on the American temper, interestingly, ignore both these Americans and the historical symbolic load they carry. Let us enter into the world that these commentators do not acknowledge, but that nevertheless shapes their interpretations, through an *in medias res* consideration of the “discovery” of white ethnicity.

White Ethnic Community

Even though certain popular works (such as *Streetcorner Society* [1943] and *The Urban Villagers* [1962]) foreshadowed the American concept of the white ethnic community, it coalesced in the early 1970s, the period in which the term “white ethnic” itself gained currency.⁶ A white ethnic, of course, exists in contradistinction to those ethnics defined as nonwhite, and thus white ethnics came into existence as a labeled group in response to the civil rights/Black Power movements and the allied organizing of Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans.

Populations we now label white ethnic—those whose antecedents arrived from (largely southeastern) Europe beginning in the 1840s and increasingly after the 1880s—were subject to intensive, largely

deprecating, or patronizing public scrutiny, particularly through the Reform and Depression eras. Popular representations of Irish, Italians, Poles, Russians and other Slavs, Jews from many states, and others as mentally deficient, dirty, diseased, and/or innately criminal were widespread. As knowledge of those representations—and the discrimination that underlay and arose from them—has fallen down the national memory hole, it may be useful to review the record here.

The *New York Tribune* commented in 1882 on the uncouth nature of Jewish immigrants in language strongly parallel to contemporary white New Yorkers’ characterization of the minority poor:

Numerous complaints have been made in regard to the Hebrew immigrants who lounge about Battery Park, obstructing the walks and sitting on the chains. Their filthy condition has caused many of the people who are accustomed to go to the park to seek a little recreation and fresh air to give up this practice. The immigrants also greatly annoy the persons who cross the park to take the boats to Coney Island, Staten Island and Brooklyn. The police have had many battles with these newcomers, who seem determined to have their own way.⁷

IQ testing was actually institutionalized as an effort to evaluate various immigrant populations’ fitness for World War I military service and thus their right to remain in the United States, and Jews, despite subsequent popular representations, were frequently defined with other southeastern Europeans as mentally inferior. In 1913, Henry Goddard applied mental tests to newly arrived immigrants and reported that 83 percent of the Jews (but only 79 percent of the Italians!) were feeble-minded.

Stanford University president David Star Jordan, in 1922 Senate testimony, distinguished northern from southern Italians on eugenic grounds. The southerners displayed “the incapacity of those hereditarily weak.”⁸ The sixty-first Congress’s Dillingham Commission’s official *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* described the southern Italian as “excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, impracticable; an individualist having little adaptability to highly organized society”; and Slavs as representing “fanaticism in religion, carelessness as to the business virtues of punctuality and often honesty, periods of besotted drunkenness among the peasantry, unexpected ferocity and cruelty in a generally placid and kind-hearted individual.”⁹

As to crime, University of Wisconsin sociologist Edward A. Ross, countermending Henry Goddard's findings, wrote in 1914 that "the fewness of Hebrews in prison has been used to spread the impression that they are uncommonly law-abiding. The fact is that it is harder to catch and convict criminals of cunning than criminals of violence. The chief of police of any large city will bear emphatic testimony as to the trouble Hebrew lawbreakers cause him. Most alarming is the great increase of criminality among Jewish young men and the growth of prostitution among Jewish girls."¹⁰

And this assessment is extremely mild compared to his treatment of Italians and Slavs. Ross went on to quote from "the Jewish press" to the effect that Jews *had* been protesting Gentiles' exaggeration of their crimes but now found themselves forced to admit the "nests of theft, robbery, murder, and lawlessness that have multiplied in our midst."¹¹ Sounding hauntingly like contemporary black sociologist William Julius Wilson's commentary on the contemporary "black underclass," this Yiddish text laments: "But when we hear of the murders, hold-ups and burglaries committed in the Jewish section by Jewish criminals, we must, with heartache, justify [our critics]."¹²

Ross's estimate of the Irish, whose great period of immigration was three to four generations past on the eve of World War I, was relatively benign: "'Tonio or Ivan now wields the shovel while Michael's boy escapes competition with him by running nimbly up the ladder of occupations.'"¹³ Nevertheless, "the children of the immigrant from Ireland often become infected with the parental slackness, unthrift, and irresponsibility."¹⁴

All of these representations, and the more positive but equally condescending liberal appraisals of the time, share several interrelated elements. They assume that southern and eastern European migrants and their descendants are "outside the circle of the we," in David Hollinger's apt phrasing; that therefore well-off white professionals have the right to speak for and about the character of those less well-off; and that there is an inextricable connection between cultural Otherness and (self-caused) poverty.¹⁵ Where commentators differ—then and now—is in their evaluation of that cultural difference. Eugenicists presumed it was genetically determined, whereas others used more or less plastic notions of culture, leaving the door open for "assimilation" to erase unpleasant traits.

Feminist theorists, following Simone de Beauvoir (who herself appropriated the immanence/transcendence distinction from Jean-

Paul Sartre’s existentialism), have commented on western political theory’s pervasive functionalist orientation in interpreting women’s lives. Susan Okin notes succinctly that “philosophers, in laying the foundation for their political theories, have asked ‘What are men like?’ ‘What is man’s potential?’ have frequently, turning to the female sex, asked ‘What are women *for*?’”¹⁶

We can see an analogous orientation in Gilded Age/Progressive Era discourse on “strangers in the land”—the title of John Higham’s classic study of American nativism.¹⁷ “We” Wasps simply *are* Americans; there is no need to interrogate our utility to the nation. But “they” may or may not be of use. And for many Americans of (non-Irish) northwest European origin, the meaning of “use” was nakedly obvious. The vast immigrant influx was an economic bonanza for transportation interests—particularly steamship and railroad companies; for tenement owners; for manufacturing, mining, and agricultural firms; and for many other employers of unskilled labor. It was a recurrent nightmare for union organizers and a wide variety of already resident workers whose wages employers could beat down with the specter of immigrant competition. Nativist sentiments were thus filtered (as they are now) through sets of interests—labor under threat and elements of capital that either profited little from new immigration or for which profit could not override racist repugnance.

In 1930, Madison Grant and other racist eugenicists published an anti-immigration compendium whose title, *The Alien in Our Midst, or, Selling Our Birthright for a Mess of Industrial Pottage*, clearly comments on the contemporary tension between perceived economic self-interest and eugenics theory.¹⁸ Of the 1911 Dillingham Commission’s forty-one volumes of reports, fully twenty-three deal with immigrant representation, skills, and pay in a wide variety of American industries. A color chart produced by the Central Tube Company in Pittsburgh in 1925 grades thirty-six groups on their “racial adaptability to various types of plant work,” including such categories as “smoke and fumes” and “night shift.”¹⁹ Ross himself was fired from Stanford University by Jane Stanford, widow of the university’s founder and sole trustee, for his racist speeches against Chinese immigration. Stanford’s motives, however, were not antiracist but self-interested: As Rosalind Rosenberg notes, “Stanford’s fortune had been built on the backs of Oriental labor and she did not wish to see this diligent labor supply cut short.”²⁰